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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined how school participants in two schools in a Florida city coped with conflict, with a focus on developing a cooperative school climate. Constructivism, which states that learning is the making-sense of experiences in a social environment, provides the theoretical framework. From this perspective, knowledge is personally constructed; different individuals hold different interpretations of reality. Data were derived from observation, document analysis, and formal and informal interviews with different participants in two urban, public schools (one elementary and one middle school) in a low socioeconomic-status area of a Florida city. Participants in the school community organized themselves in different groups related to their common goals. For example, the teachers organized themselves to improve the daily functioning of their schools. A parent-teacher organization gradually involved administration to more effectively coordinate school activities. Each group shared school restructuring as its ultimate goal. Understanding and learning how to deal with the different conflicts led to a more positive school environment that was more conducive to student learning. A recommendation is to include change in the school culture as a subject in teacher-education programs. (LMI)

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Collaborative Efforts in the School Culture

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Collaborative Efforts in the School Culture

Introduction

The culture, or the climate of the schools has been analyzed by many researchers and many valuable publications are related to this subject (Barth, 1991; Bennett & LeCompte; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elmore and associates, 1991; Lieberman and Miller, 1984; Lortie, 1975; Maxwell & Thomas, 1991; Sarason, 1971; Sparkes, 1991). Some of the literature focuses more on the teacher as "the principal actor" in a play, while other works analyze all factors related to the school curriculum by giving each one of them equal weight.

In our research, we examined different components of the school culture in two schools in a Florida city, and at their ways to overcome some of the conflicts in their environment. Participants in the school community organized themselves in different groups related to their common goals. For example, the teachers organized themselves in order to consider improving the day-by-day functioning of the schools. Another group, the parent-teacher organization, was composed of parents and teachers at the beginning, but gradually involved administration representatives for a better coordination of school activities. School restructuring was the ultimate goal of the groups working in the different schools. Understanding and learning how to deal with the different conflicts led to a better atmosphere in the schools and an environment that was more conducive to the learning of the children.

Purpose

School participants face conflicts in their every-day lives that mirror their understandings of themselves, their roles in the school culture, the meanings of education, and the roles of schools in the society (Beyer & Apple, 1988; Dewey, 1916; Elmore and associates, 1991; Walker & Soltis, 1986).

In our study we have been interested in describing and analyzing conflicts that school participants (students, teachers, administrators, parents, advisors) face and how they cope with them in an atmosphere of cooperation that is beginning to develop at the two school sites participating in the study.

In this paper there is an attempt to address the following questions:

- How do the different school participants relate (react in relation) to the segregation of communities within the city?
- How do school committee participants get involved in the school culture?

Theoretical Referents

In order to understand the school culture, we need to analyze signs and their

meaning in the cultural milieu. School experiences like receiving awards, examinations, retention, planning, and evaluation, among others, have social explanations even if we take them for granted. The art of uncovering meanings behind the "secret" and "sacred" signs was inspired by the study of semiotics referred by Solomon (1988). By analyzing the reasoning behind school experiences, we were able to make sense of the school culture. Our analysis of different aspects of power, control and norms in the school culture has been informed by the work of Karabel and Halsey's (1977).

In the analysis of different experiences of the participants in the school culture we have found constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1988) to be useful. According to this epistemology, learning is the making sense of experiences in a social environment. What each of us is calling knowledge is a personal construction. Reality as knowledge, becomes a personal construction and it's viability is created in the social milieu. Cognizing beings have different realities as a result of the different interpretations of what we perceive based on our previous experiences.

Directly related to the constructivist epistemology is the idea that embodies, that the negotiation of meanings in groups, where participants that feel equals work together toward a common goal. The consensus reached in such a community empowers the participants (Freire, 1990; Grundy, 1987).

Collaboration among different participants in the school is a necessary step to improve and reorganize the school culture. The notion of collaboration is negotiated among group members (Rushcamp & Roehler, 1992).

Research Methodology

This study has taken place in two urban, public school sites: one elementary and a middle school, both located in an area with a population of low social-economic status. The schools are the sites of the ESOL programs (students having English as a second language) in town.

Multiple data sources were used in this research. Written observations during meetings among the different group members, formal and informal interviews with the different participants in the school culture, and different documents were analyzed and interpreted as suggested by (Gallagher, 1991; Erickson, 1986) in the process of generating data. Searching for authenticity of our understanding of the school culture, triangulation (Berg, 1989; Patton, 1980) was used to validate the data generated using different techniques. Challenging the viability of data is the central point of this approach.

What Have We Learned?

Equality and equity are the basic principles used to organize the distribution of

benefits in the school system, while the society aims toward capitalistic goals. As reported by an administrator working with money distribution in the school system, tax money goes into the schools according to the number of students, and not according to the location of the school. However, there is a big difference in the appearance and function between schools situated in areas with populations having different socio-economic status.

In the case of this Floridian city, students are required to attend schools in the areas where they live. It is called zoning, and there are maps showing which areas of the city belong to which schools. Even in the case of high schools, that are situated mainly in one part of the city, the main principle in the division of students is according to zoning. There are exceptions when students are permitted to attend a high school in a different zoning area. These requests needs to be presented and approved by the School Board, and the usually accepted reason for change is a special program existent in a specific high school, but missing in the high school in the zone where the student belongs. This rules brought to "legal" ways of braking the rules. As some of the parents, and even administrators and teachers from schools suggest:

> All you need to do is find a friend and give his address as your own. Some years ago it was sufficient. Now you need to be sometime at the new address, have some cloths, or a room with some of your stuff, because they send sometimes people to make sure that it is not another "fake" address.

Many citizens are moving to other areas in the town so they will be able to send their children to a"better" school. Moving means disconnecting themselves from the well known neighborhood, their friends, their children's friends, their growing community. In the city we find the beginning of a new moving culture- mostly low middle class income. These is the population that have the possibility to move in another, more expensive area. Discussing this matter with the children, many of them are closed in their new houses, outsiders of the new environment. They are not invited to join the existing groups on the new site for long periods of time. Their parents refuse to drive the children to the old neighborhood to play with the old friends. These children grow up with a strong feeling of not belonging during teen-aging, already a difficult period in everyone's life.

> I do not want to make friends. Who knows? Tomorrow my parents will decide to move again, and I will ge hurt again. Why should I put so much time and energy in a possible temporary relationship?

That is the way we build individuals afraid to develop relationships, afraid of the hurt that may come if they need to move. This feeling exists also in the graduate student population at the universities, when students know that after graduation they need to move to another university, usually in another part of the United States. As one of the students expressed himself:

> I am a very emotive person. I care, and like to be surrounded by friends. On the other side I can not forget when I moved here from X and I had to leave my family and friends. I thought that my heart will not stand the emotion. Now I am here for three years, to move again to another place after I finish. I am emotive, and I have a lot of friends. What scares me, and sometimes stops me from building relationships, is the feeling of saying good bye again.

The organization of the school culture depends directly on the community where the school is located. Changing community means changing schools, and with that changing the whole notion of goals, norms and motivation. School change and improvement came about as a result of perceiving the school as a learning place and education as a commitment. Different organizations evolved in the process of school change.

Site base decision making organization involves teachers working at the same school. The goal of the group is to be able to deal with on-site problems involving teachers. It means that teachers will become more and more involved in the decisions regarding the division of students according to their considerations, like ability, experience, expertise. This process involves the development of an internal mechanism for teachers to assess each others and their own experiences.

The new organization took over one of the previous roles of the administration. It is still a new role, and as one of the participants, a mathematics teacher at the middle school expresses himself:

> It is a scaring feeling. Having to decide on such important issues like who is the person to get hired in which position, or if X is able to teach another course, it really scares me. It was easier to sit in the disempowered position, without having this responsibility. On the other hand, from the previous position we could not change anything. But it is still scaring to have all this power to decide.

Providing teachers with the power to decide brought them together. They understood that such decisions need to involve all the participants, and they negotiated roles within the new group. Many teachers were surprised with the amount of work that the administration had to deal with before the organization of the site base. Teachers began appreciating the work of the administrators, and now they are interested to take active, or even leading roles in many of the previous considered "administration" jobs.

Teachers belonging to the site base organization, as well as to other organizations spend more time trying to solve problems related to their "job". However, being part of the decision making group provided them with the feeling of ownership regarding school management, and collegiality developed based on reciprocal trust and respect.

As in all schools, the parent-teacher organization (PTO) gathered together mostly parents, few teachers, and administration (usually the principal). The goal of this organization is to facilitate communication between the active groups influencing students' learning: teachers, administration, and parents. A chosen group of students is also actively involved in school decisions.

It is interesting to observe that in the elementary school where the principal was involved and hold the leading role till now in the PTO, she continued to open the discussions of this group. In the by-laws of the new organization it was clearly written that the person opening the meetings will be the president of the PTO. In one of the meetings, when the principal was absent, this point was raised and addressed. The teachers and parents checked the written by-laws and decided to present this issue in the next meeting. The teachers did not report the incident in the "minutes" of the meeting, and as one of the teachers expressed herself, "It will be easier to tell her in person". The principal still holds a leading role with the teachers' minds, while the parents feel more independent. It seems that it is difficult to change old habits.

In the middle school, where there is a new principal, the communication is more open, and the PTO president opens the sessions. One of the parents discusses the role of the principal in the PTO meetings as:

> The principal comes to all the meetings and keeps us informed with the new grants, and the partners that are coming in. We are on very collegial terms with her, and there are many discussions regarding the development of the school, and better use of resources. We feel like real partners in providing the students with better learning opportunities and active involvement.

District Advisory Council (DAC) is an organization for the whole district composed mostly by parents of students at all levels: elementary, middle, and high school. Few students from high schools also attend the monthly meetings. Topics of DAC relate to general problems in education like overcrowded schools, district rezoning, use of resources, juvenile crime, and others. The meetings are divided in level discussions (where the participants discuss issues related to elementary, middle, or high school), and general discussions where the formed groups contain members of the different levels. Recommendations from these meetings are sent and supported at the district level. One or two parents from each school have the role of being involved in the discussions and decisions in DAC, as well as a reporting role in the PTO meetings.

PTO Executive Board is another group functioning in schools. It is composed by teachers, parents, and administrators. The presence of parents is required in the by-laws, and the DAC recommended for the chosen parents to function only in this role in the specific school. This recommendation came as a result of parents being also teachers in some of the schools in town. Having two roles neutralized some of their actions.

This group gathers information from all other organizations (PTO, site base, and District Advisory Council), and their role is to consider what was reported with respect to implementation on the specific site, and to draw the lines of the school improvement plan.

These organizations operate on different levels. The levels of operation relate to the goals each one of the organization has. In the case where there was a common goal, the different organizations functioned as one. As one of the parent participants in the middle school reports:

> We had a very inefficient principal last year. He just did not function. He was busy doing small administrative work, but the students, as well as the whole school was falling apart. There was no respect for anyone there. Students were aggressive to one another, teacher were not communicating, and the administration was separated from the principal. We had to change the principal, and we had the teachers with us because they understood that the principal was dysfunctional. The superintendent heard about our concern, and interviewed three candidates with the purpose to decide on a new principal.

Parents and teachers, as well as one vice-principal met many times to decide what we (as a group) should do if we feel discontent with the new principal chosen by the superintendent. It was decided that the parents will take an active role if something like that will happen. In this case the parents decided that they will not allow the opening of the school. Parents were aware that the teachers could not come with them in such an action, because they were employed by the school district.

The new principal is a very good one, full with energy, looking for opportunities to improve the school. She is the one closing the school at night usually. We feel as colleagues having the same goal. It is interesting that the feeling of being partners in the process of choosing the principal gave teachers and parents a new image related to the power they represent if they are organized in a group.

When there was an opening for a biology teacher in the middle school, I recommended one of my colleagues from the university. The colleague is a biology teacher without experience in teaching. The recommendation was made having in mind two roles. One role is that as a parent, I appreciate my colleague and believe that she will become a very good biology teacher. The second role is of a colleague. I think the atmosphere at the school, and the beautiful collegial relationships developing will provide the necessary foundation for my colleague to grow, and overcome difficulties. My colleague during the interview meetings expressed herself:

> Even if I do not get the job, I need to tell you that they [the teachers] have very good relationships between themselves. And the principal seems to be one of them. They talk on the corridor in a very friendly, collegial way.

When offered a job in another middle school situated in a "better" neighborhood, my colleague refused saying: "I do not see the same relationships between the teachers, nor the feeling of belonging in the other school."

Empowerment of the different elements operating in the school culture was a continuous and sometimes painful process, but the results get appreciation and are taken as personal achievements.

Significance of the Study

The process of changing school environments from the image described as a workplace metaphor to a learning environment (Marshall, 1991) is a continuum pulled by the will of the participants to collaborate for change. The immediate implication is that the participants have to learn about their capabilities to work together as a group having a common goal and being able to change things that they thought before as unchangeable ("sacred" or "tabu"). The parts also became aware of their power when they seek to reach a common goal.

Change in school culture needs to be included as a subject in the Teacher Education programs in the university. We face now reform in schools, and the different roles of the partners need to be clarified. Parents and teachers take an active role in their schools, while the administration changes roles too. All the partners in the school culture need to be perceived as collaborators. Collaboration based on sharing as equals in a community of learners needs to be considered in such programs. The community needs to have representatives from the different participating areas of the school culture, equally involved, sharing a common goal of improving education. As researchers we should like to continue and see how these parts continue to work together and facilitate the development of a community of learners sharing the common goals.

The "sacred", like schooling according to zoning need to be uncovered and de-constructed. Once it had the purpose of keeping the *status quo*. What purpose does it serve today?

Research regarding reform in schools, or as Beyer relates it to the main purpose of democracy (1988) is a fascinating subject to be followed because it addresses the question of change in the role of schools in our society. From the place where the past society was copied to ensure continuation, to the community developing empowered participants and critical minds.

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